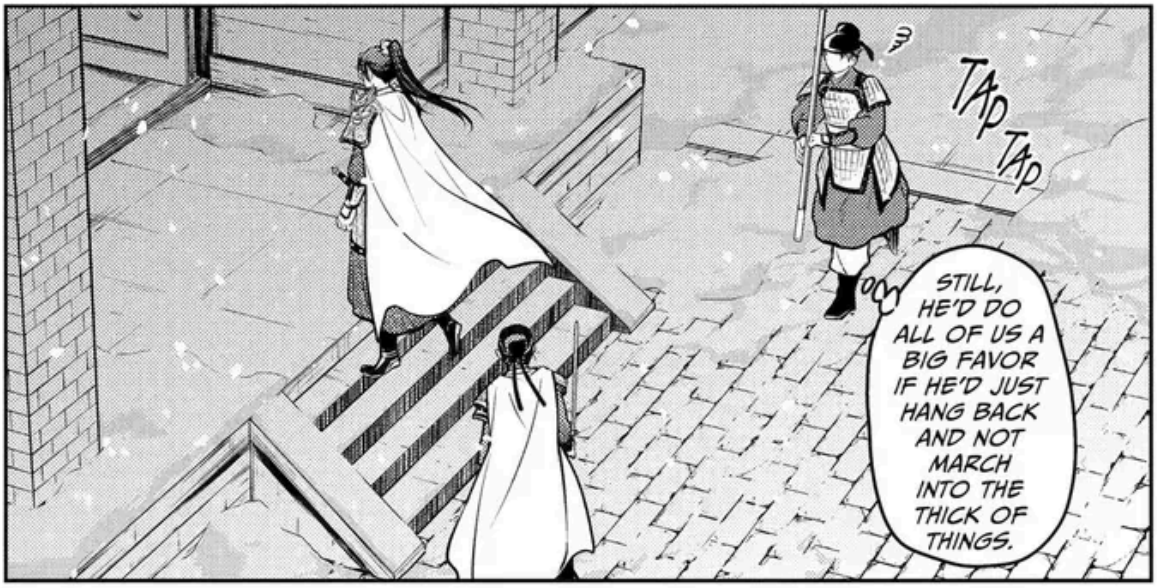
HM?
FWSH
THERE WAS APPARENTLY A MAJOR EARTHQUAKE HERE A FEW DECADES AGO.
EVER SINCE, THE REGION'S BEEN MORE PRONE TO AVALANCHES ...
Chapter 82: Surprise Attack
IS THAT...?
WELL... THIS IS THE FORBIDDEN ARMY AND ALL. I SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISED.
HA HA


TAP TAP
STILL, HE'D DO ALL OF US A BIG FAVOR IF HE'D JUST HANG BACK AND NOT MARCH INTO THE THICK OF THINGS.

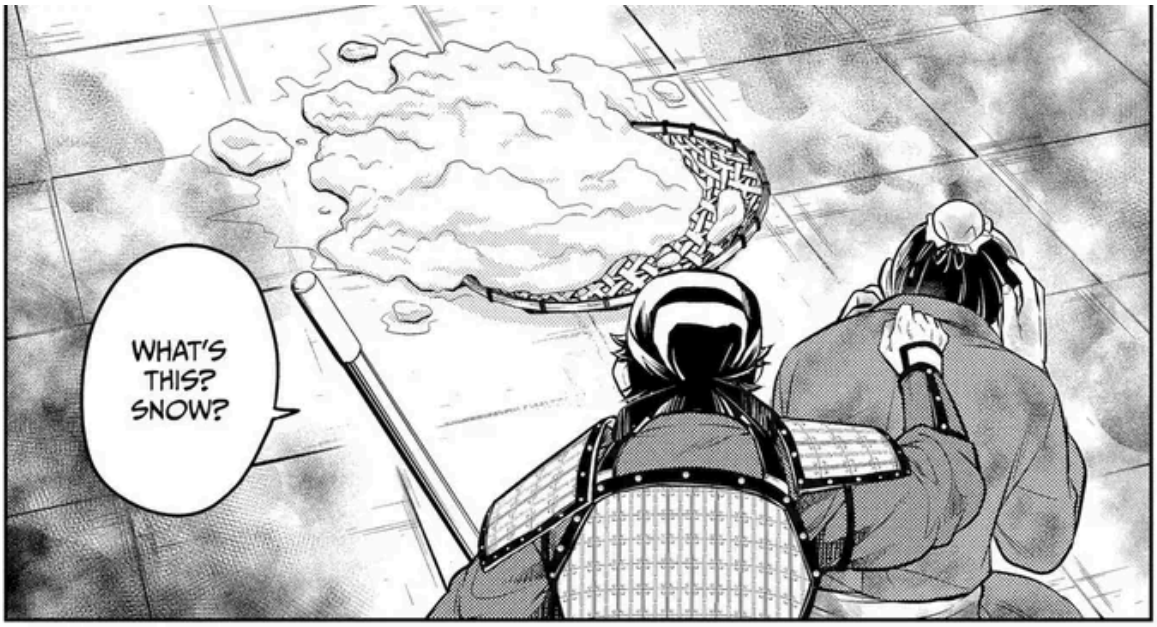
LOOKS LIKE HE DOESN'T HAVE THAT GAO SHUN ATTENDING HIM TODAY.

WHEN JINSHI THE EUNUCH STEPPED UP TO LEAD THE FORBIDDEN ARMY...!
... REACTIONS RANGED FROM DUMB-FOUNDED TO OUTRIGHT AGHAST.
THERE WERE EVEN SOME INSANE RUMORS, JUST BECAUSE HE'S SO GORGEOUS.

BUT HE'S FAR MORE THAN THAT.
AS THE GARDENER OF THE INNER COURT'S GARDEN ...
...MANY SAW HIM AS BUT ONE OF THE MANY BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS.
HE'S A BLOOMING FLOWER. THE BLOOMING FLOWER THAT SITS ATOP THE THREE BLADES IN THE CHARACTER FOR THIS LAND, "LI."
SCARCE FEW ARE EVEN ALLOWED TO ADDRESS EITHER BY THOSE NAMES.
AND ONLY TWO IN THIS LAND BEAR THAT FLOWER IN THEIR NAME.
THE EMPEROR AND HIS YOUNGER BROTHER.

CRNCH
CRNCH
CRNCH
YET HE WEARS THAT ORNATE PIN IN HIS HAIR.
THAT ALONE WOULD TELL YOU HE'S REALLY NOT LIKE THE ORDINARY SOLDIERS HERE.
HE'S NOT SOMEONE WHO SHOULD MARCH FOR HOURS THROUGH THE FREEZING COLD.
WHAT'S THAT SMELL? IT'S LIKE... ROTTEN EGGS.
UGH!
RSTL
RSTL

ACK!
FWM
WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING ?!
GRP
SPLSH


WHAT'S THIS? SNOW?

SHVR
SHVR
...OR ELSE THE M-M-MISTRESS ...
...W...
...WE MUST... CLEAN EVERYTHING UP, AFTER THE EXPLOSION... QUICKLY ...

DID SOMEONE MISCALCULATE SOMEWHERE?
THERE'S NOT NEARLY AS MANY SOLDIERS HERE AS EXPECTED.

YOU MAY SPEAK.
IT WOULD BE BETTER NOT TO LINGER HERE, IN THE MIDST OF ALL THIS SMOKE.
EVERYONE INSIDE SHOULD EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY.
SHAA
YOU BRING COUNSEL?
THERE COULD BE STRAGGLERS TRAPPED INSIDE.
WE CAN ORGANIZE A SEARCH. PLEASE, STEP OUTSIDE.

GRAND COMMANDANT KAN'S DAUGHTER WAS KIDNAPPED AND TAKEN HERE.
UGH
THAT I CANNOT DO.
COME ON, MAN! JUST GET OUT OF HERE! WATCH FROM A SAFE DISTANCE OR SOME-THING!
IF YOU GET HURT, THEN...!
HE HAS A DAUGH-TER?
WHO, THAT FREAKY TACTICIAN LAKAN? I CAN'T THINK OF ANYONE ELSE.
GRAND COMMAN-DANT...
WOULD YOU ABANDON HER?

IF I DID...
...I WOULD BE MAKING A POWERFUL ENEMY.
YES.
YOU WOULD.

IS THE IMPERIAL BROTHER FINISHED WITH THE WHOLE EUNUCH DEAL AT THIS POINT?
LOOK AT WHAT'S BECOME OF THE ONCE POWERFUL SHI CLAN.
WE KNOW WHAT THEY'RE GUILTY OF. CAPTURING SOLDIERS IS A FORMALITY BY NOW.
...
SCRTCH SCRTCH
WHATEVER BALANCE EXISTED IN THE IMPERIAL COURT IS CRUMBLING AWAY AT THIS VERY MOMENT.
AND EXPECTING MERCY AFTER TURNING AGAINST THE EMPEROR IS A FOOL'S HOPE.

LET'S JUST GET THIS OVER WITH AS QUICK AS WE CAN.
THAT RUMBLING JUST NOW WAS AN AVALANCHE ?
BETWEEN THAT AND THE EXPLOSION, THE STENCH IS HORRID.

...BUT LUCKILY ENOUGH, IT DIDN'T REACH THIS FAR.
THE STORE-HOUSE WAS TOTALLY BURIED ...
THIS IS ABOUT WHAT I EXPECTED TO HAPPEN.
WELL, A PRINCIPAL CONSORT ESCAPED THE INNER COURT...
...AND HER FAMILY HUNKERED DOWN IN A GIANT FORTRESS.
THOSE WHITE COATS MAKE THEM HARD TO MAKE OUT ...
...BUT ARE THOSE SOLDIERS SENT HERE TO CLAMP DOWN ON THE REBEL-LION?

AH!
IS THAT ...?

I KNOW IT IS. HOW DO I KNOW IT IS?
BUT...
IT COULDN'T BE.
DID HE COME HERE TO SAVE ME HIMSELF?

CLACK
I MISTOOK HIM FOR SOMEONE ELSE.
EITHER WAY, I'LL BE DISCOVERED BEFORE LONG.
... THAT CAN'T BE IT.
THERE'S JUST NO WAY.

WHAT SHOULD I DO?
I THINK ...
...IT'D BE SMARTEST FOR ME TO RUN.
THE QUESTION IS WHAT HAPPENS TO ME THEN.

GRK...
WHAT I SHOULD DO...
...IS RUN. THAT'S IT.
GREAT. NOW I KNOW I'M AS MUCH OF A FOOL AS SHISUI.

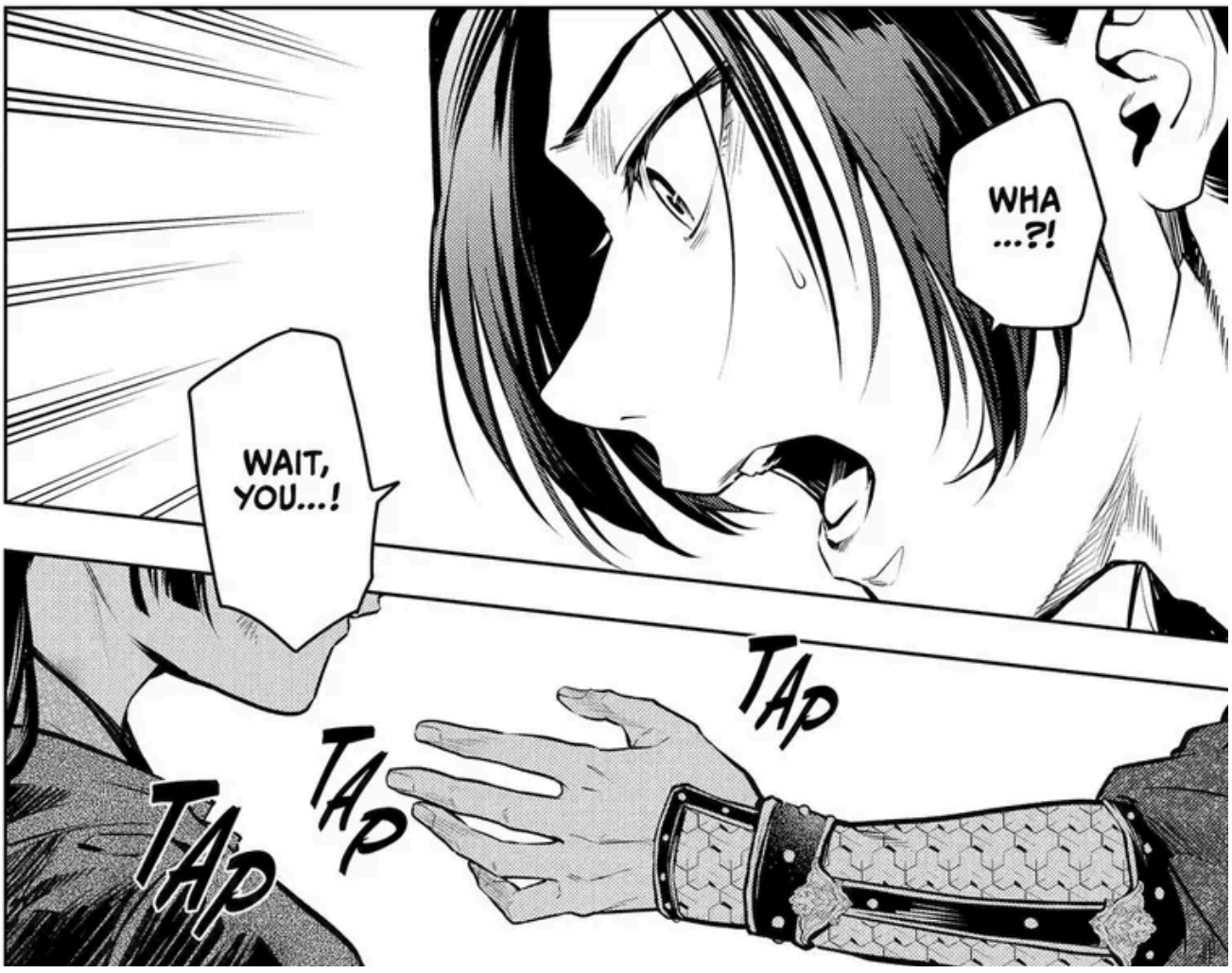
THD
THD
THD
THD
THD
OKAY. THE LEAST YOU CAN DO IS HEAR ME OUT.
THD
THD
SLAM

...
...
AH.
EXCUSE ME.
MAY I ASK FOR YOUR PROTECTION ...
...SIR JINSHI?

CHK
ARE YOU HURT?
OH.
PLEASE, JUST IGNORE THIS.
IT IS NOT MY BLOOD.

SNN...
YOU...
AH!
HOW CAN I IGNORE THAT?!
IT IS ONLY SNAKE BLOOD.
HAAH...
THAT'S THE JINSHI I REMEMBER.
HEH...

PHEW
IT'S ALMOST REASSURING.


WHA ...?!
WAIT, YOU...!
TAP
TAP
TAP

CROWN PRINCE!
TAP
I AM THE CROWN PRINCE NO MORE.
THE EMPEROR NOW HAS A SON.
I'VE NEVER SEEN HIM ACT LIKE THIS.

THEN, CONSORT GYOKUYO DELIVERED HER CHILD SAFELY?
AND HE'S A BOY, AT THAT.
OF COURSE ...
...EVERY-THING IS CRYSTAL CLEAR NOW.
A NON-EUNUCH MAN THAT WAS GIVEN FREE REIGN IN THE INNER COURT?
HE WOULD HAVE TO BE UNDER THE EMPEROR'S ORDERS ...
...OR HE WOULD HAVE TO BE HIS DIRECT RELATIVE.
...CROWN PRINCE, HM?

WHEN DID YOU START LOOKING SO OLD?
MMBL
I FOUND HER.
I LEAVE HER IN YOUR CARE.
YES, SIR.
MMF
FWP
SIR!
LIHAKU!

...
THAT WOULD BE BECAUSE I'M HER.
YOU KNOW, YOU BEAR A STRIKING RESEMBLANCE TO THIS PALACE GIRL I KNOW NAMED MAOMAO.
HMMM ...
I SEEM TO HAVE BEEN KIDNAPPED.
AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

DON'T EVEN SAY HIS NAME!
ZRSH
OKAY, SO...
...THEN YOUR DAD IS...?
I CAN GUESS WHO YOU'RE THINKING OF!
JUST SAY "THE OLD FART" AND I'LL KNOW WHO YOU MEAN!
WHOAA
PAP
...
REALLY? NOT EVEN ONE QUESTION?

PHWEEE
HAH, SORRY, SORRY.
BUT SURE, NOT LIKE I HAVE ANY REASON TO DOUBT YOU.
PEEK
WE FOUND HER.
SHE'S RIGHT HERE.
GOT IT.
SO WHAT'S WITH ALL THAT BLOOD ON YOU?
YOU HURT?
IT'S NOT MY BLOOD.
I GUESS I AM KIND OF HURT. SHENMEI'S FAN DID LEAVE A BRUISE.

THE OLD FART'S IN AWFUL SHAPE, BUT HE INSISTED ON COMING WITH US.
ALL TO RESCUE YOU, CLEARLY.
PAT
PAT
TRY NOT TO GET HURT, ALL RIGHT?
OH?
THEN THIS ENTIRE ASSAULT MUST HAVE BEEN THE OLD FART'S STRATEGY.
INCLUDING THE INCREDIBLY CONVENIENT AVALANCHE, SURELY.
OF COURSE, HE'S DOWN FOR THE COUNT RIGHT NOW.
SAID HE THREW HIS BACK OUT OR SOME-THING.
ARE THOSE KIDS BACK THERE SLEEPING?

...I SEE.
THEY REALLY DO LOOK LIKE THEY'RE SLEEPING.
THEY AREN'T BREATHING.
THEY SEEM TO HAVE BEEN POISONED.
IT'S A CRUSHING SCENE.
BUT THEY WOULD BE NO BETTER OFF IF THEY HAD SURVIVED.

THE ATTEMPTED ASSASSI-NATION OF A HIGH-RANKING CONSORT WAS ENOUGH TO WARRANT THE DEATH PENALTY.
AND THAT ALSO SAW THE PERPE-TRATOR'S FAMILY PUNISHED, THEIR PROPERTY SEIZED.
HIGH TREASON IS AS BAD AS CRIMES GET. WOMEN AND CHILDREN WILL SEE NO MERCY.
EVERY ONE OF THEM WILL BE SENT TO THE GALLOWS.
WHAT HAPPENS TO ALL THOSE EXECUT-ED?
WILL THEIR BODIES BE SIMPLY ABANDONED ?
NO, THEY'LL BE BURIED IN A SPECIAL GRAVEYARD.
STILL CREMATED, THOUGH.
AT THE VERY LEAST...
...CAN THE MOTHERS BE LAID TO REST WITH THEIR CHILDREN?

I DON'T KNOW.
THAT'S NOT REALLY PART OF MY JOB.
RSTL
RSTL
RRRIP

AND I'M GOING TO NEED MORE CLOTH.
HMMM
PRETTY HEAVY.

TAP TAP

SIR LIHAKU?
WHAT ...?

HEY.
LEND ME YOUR CLOAKS.
AND BRING A COUPLE MORE GUYS HERE, WOULD YOU?

WELL...
...IT DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT JUST LEAVING THEM THERE.
WE CAN'T GIVE THEM A PROPER SEND-OFF...
...BUT THE LEAST WE CAN DO IS BURY THEM NEARBY.

WILL YOU NOT GET IN TROUBLE?
NO IDEA!

RIGHT.
FIGURE SOMETHING OUT...

BUT IF I DO, YOU CAN FIGURE SOMETHING OUT!
WHAP
WHAP

OH!
I KNOW!

DADDY'S HERE!
I BET IF YOU JUST CALL THE OLD FART "DADDY," THEN...
...HE'D DO ANYTHING YOU WANT!

EEP

...SORRY. FORGET I SAID ANYTHING.